

Martin Luther And The Jews

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By Mark Albrecht

This past summer as our SQI group was holding a worship service in the ruins of a synagogue on top of Masada, a Canadian Jew took advantage of a pause in the sermon to give us some of his philosophy. He asked us why we had picked the synagogue, of all places, as a place for a Christian service. He then went on to complain that for centuries Christians had been killing Jews in the name of religion. His most biting remark, however, was when he accused us of blaspheming that synagogue and the name of God by preaching the Gospel of Jesus. I wonder what he would have said if he had known that it was a Lutheran worship service? On another part of the trip, some of the Israelis at the dig, who knew that we were Lutherans, made a few uncomplimentary remarks about Martin Luther. They were equating Luther and Hitler; in a sense, they were accusing Luther of being partially responsible for the terrible Jewish holocaust of Nazi Germany. These accusations, of course, did not sit very well with me. I decided to look into the documents and their historical setting. This paper, then, will center on this question: Can Luther rightly be labeled an antisemite?

Many Luther scholars say that Luther's views of the Jews underwent an extreme change in his lifetime. They claim that Luther at first showed friendship and compassion to the Jews early in his life, only to turn against them later on. His writings may seem to indicate this.

Luther's earliest known dealing with the Jews occurred in 1510. A converted Jew named Pfefferkorn accused his former people of all kinds of cruelties and blasphemies. He then arranged to have Jewish books burned. John Reuchlin, the foremost Hebrew scholar of Germany, opposed Pfefferkorn's actions. Luther here sided with Reuchlin. Some take this to be an indication of Luther's early pro-Jewish views.

Luther's actions, of course, were not strictly pro-Jewish, but were more in support of true scholarship, especially where it would aid Biblical study. But some of the Jews of the day failed to understand Luther correctly. A Jewish historian correctly notes:

They were overjoyed that at last a famous Christian teacher spoke of them as human beings. A few enthusiasts among the Jews of Germany went so far in their misunderstanding of Luther that they actually congratulated him on the steps he was taking to come closer to Judaism.¹

Luther apparently was not troubled by this development at this time. He was optimistic that the Jews, the true blood relatives of Christ, would be converted once the abuses of the Catholic church were removed.

In the early days of the Reformation Luther placed the onus of the blame for Jewish unbelief on the Catholic church. In 1523 his pen produced a favorable tract, "That Christ was born a Jew." He told the Jews that he could understand why they didn't want to join the Catholic church. He writes, "The papists have so demeaned themselves that a good Christian would rather be a Jew than one of them, and a Jew would rather be a sow than a Christian."² Not only was Luther understanding toward them, he also optimistically thought that they would then become Christians. Luther showed this attitude:

I hope that if one deals with the Jews in a kindly way and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs.³

Luther's optimism clearly showed itself, but he did not go so far as to lose touch with reality. He proposed dealing with them in Christian love, but even then he knew they would not all be converted. But this thought did not seem to bother him, as he said, "If some of them prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either."⁴

Luther's kind words and compassionate understanding produced noticeable results. His pamphlet, "That Christ was born a Jew" met with special favor. The Jews read and circulated his writings. One Jewish historian even said this of Luther's works, "The Jews of Antwerp sent them to Spain, their former homeland, and even as far away as Palestine."⁵ So, Luther's writing did produce definite results. However, these were not the results that Luther was expecting.

Needless to say, the Jews of Germany did not beat a path to Luther's door. Mainly for this reason Luther's views of the Jews began to change. A Jewish historian said this about Luther:

He thought he could win the Jews with a few kind words. When this did not happen, he was bitterly disappointed. He outdid the Catholics in the vile terms which he heaped on the Jews and Judaism, and advised their complete extermination. A movement, hopeful in its beginning for the Jews, ended in utter disillusionment.⁶

This, however, was only a small factor in Luther's change.

The medieval world simply did not have much use for Jews. Numerous superstitions arose against the Jews. They poisoned wells, practiced sorcery, murdered and ate children, they even carried the Black plague. Luther had been brought up under the influence of this barrage of ideas. He was a product of this times as can be seen from this letter to his wife explaining the reason he caught a cold:

We had to pass through a village close to Eisleben where many Jews live, and perhaps they blew on me, for there is no doubt that at the village a strong wind blew in the back of the carriage, threatening to turn my brain into ice.⁷

In short, if they needed to blame someone, they blamed the Jews.

Others have cited Luther's health problems and his disappointment with the obstacles that the Reformation was facing as other probable causes for the causes of Luther's change. One report says that the papists had hired a Jewish hitman to do away with Luther.⁸ These may have affected Luther, but again they are only part of the picture.

The main reason for the change centered on religion. In Moravia Lutherans were beginning to keep the Sabbath day and enforce the rite of circumcision. Just as Paul was upset with the Judaizers in Galatia, Luther was upset that people were preaching law instead of Gospel freedom. So Luther wrote the tract, "Against the Sabbatarians." This, however, did not stop this activity. Zealous rabbis began enticing Christians away from their faith. They even began to write Jewish apologetic pamphlets in reply to Luther. Luther's patience simply ran out. The change has been described this way:

From the mild and friendly call of the Gospel for all to come to Jesus, he changed it to the idea of chastisement through the law of God as a means of bringing them to repentance.⁹

Finally in May of 1542 Luther received from a Moravian friend, a certain Count Schlink, a copy of a Jewish apologetic work along with the request that he reply to it. Luther's anger boiled over; restraint could not contain his anger, and the result was a lengthy tract, "Against the Jews and their lies."

This treatise of Luther's may come as a shock to many. The language is very biting; his proposals almost seem inhumane. Yet, the context of Luther and his times must be kept in mind to properly understand what Luther really meant.

Luther very thoroughly and systematically condemned the religious errors of the Jewish people. Right from the start it can be seen that he no longer was writing to convert them:

It is not my purpose to quarrel with the Jews, nor to learn from them how they interpret the scriptures, I know all that very well already. Much less do I propose to convert the Jews, for that is impossible.¹⁰

So, the change in Luther's approach is obvious from the start.

First of all he lashed out against the false boasts of the Jewish people. The Jews took special pride in their ancestry; they were thankful that they were God's chosen people, the physical descendants of the patriarchs. Luther replied, "They boast of being the noblest, yea, the only people on earth. In comparison with them we Gentiles are not human, in fact we hardly deserve to be considered mere worms by them."¹¹ In reply to this boast Luther pointed out the common ancestry of all people in Adam and Eve. Another boast they flaunted was their special rite of circumcision. Luther countered this claim by pointing out that other religions have this same custom. Their third major boast centered on the promised land. But Luther asked why they would boast about a land they had not possessed for 1500 years. He let none of their false boasts stand unscathed.

Following this section, Luther proceeded to an exegesis and explanation of key OT prophecies. Using a book they too regarded as sacred, he cited several key Messianic prophecies. He proved to them from God's word that *olam* need not mean 'forever,' that David's ruling house was not an earthly dynasty, and that Christ perfectly fulfilled all the Messianic requirements. But Luther did not expect this to produce great results; he said:

When I debated with them, they gave me their glosses, as they usually do. But when I forced them back to the text, they soon fled from it, saying they were obliged to believe their rabbis. The more one tries to help them, the baser and more stubborn they become. Leave them to their own devices.¹²

Nevertheless, he spent nearly one-half of this lengthy treatise explaining scriptural proofs for the Jews.

Luther then listed a few reasons for his dislike of them. A medieval rabbi wrote "Der gantz Juedisch glaub," which contained this interesting sidelight; "Jesus is a whore's son, his mother Mary was a whore, who conceived him in adultery with a blacksmith."¹³ Another matter

that Luther along with almost all Europeans, could not tolerate was the Jewish practice of usury. He found this particularly detestable.

Had Luther stopped here, his treatise probably would be of little interest to anyone. However, he went on to propose what he thought should be done about the situation. His "sincere advise"¹⁴ consisted of seven major points: 1) burn their synagogues and schools, 2) raze and destroy their homes, 3) take away their books, 4) forbid their rabbis to teach, 5) allow no safe-conduct for them on the highways, 6) prohibit usury, take their money from them, and 7) put an ax, hoe, or spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews to let them earn their bread. As if this were not enough, Luther was still bothered about the abusive blasphemy of the Jews. He wrote: "We are at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which they shed...we are at fault for not slaying them."¹⁵ No one can accuse Luther of understatement.

Yet, one cannot concentrate only on these several pages of vitriolic invectives. In this same writing he calls on God to soften their hearts with this entreaty: "O God, heavenly father, relent and let your wrath over them be sufficient and come to an end, for the sake of your dear Son."¹⁶ Finally, Luther closes with this prayer for their conversion, "May Christ, our dear Lord, convert them mercifully and preserve us steadfastly in the knowledge of him, which is eternal life."¹⁷ This was no mere cover-up for his harsh statements. Rather, it shows that Luther wrote this way out of religious considerations.

Yet, needless to say, religious reasons or not, not everyone is proud to identify with Luther on this article. Luther's contemporaries were dismayed; Melanchthon and Osiander condemned it. A 1543 document of the Zurich churches reads, "If it had been written by a swineherd, rather than by a celebrated shepherd of souls, it might have some-but very little justification."¹⁸ Fortunately, Luther was not taken literally. One possible result was produced; Elector John expelled the Jews from Saxony.¹⁹ Otherwise, this article incited no persecutions or exterminations of the Jews. It remained, for the most part, undisturbed until this present century.

It took a modern day madman to bring this treatise out of the cobwebs. That madman was no other than Adolph Hitler. He was able to quote the writings of Luther—not often with their original meaning--to his own advantage. Luther always remained a famous German hero. Hitler recognized this, and being no fool, played it for all it was worth. Here is one example from an early speech:

I do insist that sooner or later...Christianity will be overcome and the German church established. Yes, the German church, without a pope, without the Bible, and Luther, if he could be with us, would give us his blessing.²⁰

It's a rather obvious fact that Hitler was misrepresenting Luther.

Yet there are many so-called scholars who claim that Luther's treatise on the Jews gave Hitler the ideas for the holocaust of WW II. Time magazine had this to say a number of years ago, "His statements about the Jews would sound excessive on the tongue of a Hitler."²¹ Another respectable source, William Shirer, also lays the blame at Luther's doorstep. He writes, "In his utterances about the Jews, Luther employed a coarseness and brutality of language unequalled in German history until the Nazi time."²² Even though Shirer researched rather carelessly on this topic, still his respectability as a historian did much to harm Luther's reputation.

But then there are blatant idiots, who sensationalize their blind ignorance for all they can. The worst of these is Peter Wiener, who wrote a "win with peace" pamphlet in England in the

early 1940s. He claimed that he had discovered the real Luther, whom Lutherans had kept hidden for the past four hundred years. He described Lutheran support of Hitler this way:

These facts are unpleasant and horrible. I maintain that we can understand them and explain them only if we look at the dark figure from whom the German Lutheran clergy has for four centuries taken their orders--Martin Luther.²³

Wiener especially took pleasure in misrepresenting Luther on the Jews. He writes:

For the greater part of his life Luther was an antisemite of the worst caliber. He knew no compromise, and in this particular instance he did not even attempt to explain or excuse his complete change of color.²⁴

Obviously Mr. Wiener did not study his history.

Actually the fact that Nazis wished to identify Luther with their cause cannot be used to prove anything. Nazi doctrine originated much later. Nazi anti-semitism is founded on "the mystical feeling for the German blood and soil and that the Jew polluted that blood--a theory for which the philosopher Duehring and the composer Wagner were especially responsible."²⁵ Nowhere in Luther's writings can the Nazi idea of Aryan antisemitism be found. However, it was to the Nazi's advantage to make Luther seem to support them. A well-known scholar says this:

These Nazi writers were only too anxious to give some intellectual respectability to the weird hotchpotch of ideas which made up Nazi doctrine by citing great names of Germany's past in their support.²⁶

It is interesting to note that most biographies of Hitler do not even mention Luther. Also interesting is the fact that respectable Jewish histories of the holocaust make no mention of Luther. These historical facts prove that Luther was not a antisemite. Luther's motives for his treatise had a totally different origin.

As stated earlier, Luther's reasons were religious. The word of God was Luther's greatest treasure. His love for the word prompted him to react violently when others disrespected the word. Heinrich Bornkamm writes "Luther's love for the Old Testament, to which he dedicated by far his scholarly efforts, and his rejection of post New Testament Jewry are two sides of the same thing."²⁷ As another scholar states, "The full title of his blast, usually quoted as *Against the Jews*, reads *Against the Jews and their Lies*, with emphasis resting on the second part."²⁸ So, Luther held no special hatred for the Jews as a race; he did not, however, have much use for their rejection of Christ.

Critics have especially blasted Luther for his strong language. Luther was a product of his times. The writers of his day were unrestrained by modern standards. It is important to note that Luther did not reverse this harsh language for the Jews alone. Luther called princes, "the greatest fools and worst knaves on earth," monks, "tame dogs that lie on pillows and whistle with their hind ends." He also said of his own people, "I know that we Germans are brutes and stupid swine." Yet no one accuses him of being anti German. This rough, graphic language was the style of the day. Luther was by no means the worst:

Luther delighted less in muck than many of the literary men of his age...Detractors have sifted from the pitch-blende of his ninety tomes a few pages of radioactive vulgarity.²⁹

The vulgarity of Luther in this tract then is of no special significance.

Also, the historical setting must be considered. Luther was not the first to speak unkindly about the Jews. The Romans disliked them, the Christians slaughtered thousands of them during the Crusades. In 1290 England expelled them, thirty years later France did likewise, in 1492 they were murdered and expelled from Spain. Bainton speaks to this situation, "If similar tracts did not appear in England, France, and Spain in Luther's day, it was because the Jews had already been completely expelled from these countries."³⁰ Luther's actions are almost mild in comparison.

One last consideration centers on the fine art of quoting out of context. The critics who condemn this writing of Luther only, of course, quote what will promote their cause. Although this treatise is more than 180 pages in length, most critics quote only a few pages. They quote Luther without considering the times or the context of his entire article. The following shows the need for contexts:

It would be quite out of place to use Luther's and Erasmus' strongly worded writings against the Turks as a weapon against modern Turkey, or to quote the pamphlet of King Henry VIII against Luther as a weapon against present-day Lutherans.³¹

Despite this, these slanderers insist on quoting Luther to promote ideas he never had any intention of saying.

And yet we need not defend Luther too far. The words from Luther's pen were not inspired. Martin Luther was a sinful human being, and his writings show this. At times we may wish that Luther would have "tread more lightly" and exercised a little more tactful restraint. On the other hand, we dare not let others falsely accuse and slander a man whom God used to restore the truth. Even in this case Luther can properly come to his own defense. For this reason I will end this paper with the a prayer that Luther included in his treatises:

With prayer and fear of God we must practice a sharp mercy to see whether we might at least save at least a few of them from the glowing flames. Avenge ourselves we dare not. Vengeance a thousand times more than we can wish them already has them by the throat.³²

This prayer more truly depicts the real Martin Luther.

ENDNOTES

1. Grayzel, *A History of the Jews*, New York: Mentor, 1968, p.374.
2. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, New York: Pierce & Smith, 1950, p. 297.
3. Luther's Works (American Edition), Vol. 45, p. 200.

4. LW, Vol. 45, p. 229.
5. Holmio, *Luther-Friend or Foe*, Chicago: Nat Luth Council, 1949, p.18.
6. Grayzel, Loc. Sit.
7. Holmio, op. cit., p.23.
8. Bainton, loc. sit.
9. Holmio, op. cit., p.26.
10. LW, Vol. 47, p. 137.
11. LW, Vol. 47, p. 140.
12. LW, Vol. 47, p. 191-2.
13. LW, Vol. 47, p. 257.
14. LW, Vol. 47, p. 268.
15. LW, Vol. 47, p. 267.
16. LW, Vol. 47, p. 292.
17. LW, Vol. 47, p. 306.
18. LW, Vol. 47, p. 123.
19. Clayton, *Luther and his Work*, Milw: Bruce Pub., 1937, p. 189.
20. Wiener, *Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*, London: Hutchinson, p.3.
21. Time, 3/24/67, p.72.
22. Shirer, *Rise and Fall*, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1960, p. 236.
23. Wiener, op. cit., p.78.
24. Wiener, op. cit., p. 59.
25. Montgomery, *In Defense of M. L.*, Milw: NPH, 1970. p. 146.
26. Ibid, p. 148.

27. Bornkamm, *Luther's World of Thought*, St. L: CPH, 1958, p. 31.

28. Simon, *Luther Alive*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1968, p. 347.

29. Montgomery, op. cit., p. 144.

30. Bainton, op. cit., p. 297.

31. Holmio, op. cit., p. 8.

32. LW, Vol. 47, p. 268.

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